"A Ship Comes In" is almost a lost film. This particular print has been shown in New York (semi-privately) only twice in the past 25 years: prior to that it rested, dusty and unseen, in a camera store in Connecticut probably since its initial release. It appears to be the only surviving print from the original negative, and has been preserved through having been resold, repackaged, and resold again. It was rather lost amidst pages of ads boosting first of all the silents doing extra business thanks to synchronised scores, and secondly announcing all the sound features coming up. First National were promising a minimum of 31 sound features for the new season, although FBO carried a double-page ad warning: DON'T BE PANICED BY SOUND - THE SHOW MUST GO ON!

The trade reviews were all good, praising the expert direction and the fine performances by Schildkraut and Dresser. (Dresser was nominated for an Academy Award; but this was the first year of the Awards, which were not necessarily given for single performances, and Schildkraut lost out to Janet Gaynor who had the cloud of several acclaimed performances working for her.) Typical review quotes: "...a well directed and flag-wagging, and therefore is one of the strongest patriotic pictures ever screened ... a natural for the Fourth, but will click any time with intelligent audiences". But the good reviews didn't pay off with good bookings. A few weeks later, the trade press cabled additional ads, not as usual, crowing over EVERY FIRST RUN THEATRE SHOULD SCREEN THIS PICTURE! The ad went on to comment on "the genius of William K. Howard" and to remind exhibitors of his past money-makers, and concluded with this spiel: "Fathe steps out with one of the big surprises of the year ... an inspiring production comparable only to the greatest masterpieces of the screen. The same dynamic human elements that kept "Brecon's "Sorrow and Sons" Nurmi's "Germans", Frank Borzage's "Seventh Heaven" and Charlie Chaplin's "A Woman of Paris" are combined to a superlative degree in "A Ship Comes In".

Needless to say, the film isn't THAT good - even close to it. But it did deserve much better perception (and might have gotten it, a year or two earlier, before the advent of sound) and it is a fine piece of work that could well have been outstanding without some of the cheapening plot gimmicks that suggest a certain amount of front office concern about its difficult plot not having enough "material". Not that the concern was altogether unreasonable. Howard's "White Gold" made the year before for the same company and, no doubt, had the protection of built-in popularity in a giant prestige project - possibly Howard's finest work, it was a sure-fire money-maker, then an insurance policy against the irremovable appeal of such pictures as Herbert Brenon's "Sorrell and Son", Nurmi's "Germans", Frank Borzage's "Seventh Heaven" and Charlie Chaplin's "Woman of Paris" turned up. And now Howard's "A Ship Comes In".

"A Ship Comes In" is a carefully made film; economically, with good sets, lighting and camerawork. The art direction of Anton Grot (whose visual style was so much beloved in the Warner films of the '30s and '40s) is particularly engaging in its use of space, light and shadows, often merely suggesting (as in the prison scenes) rather than literally creating. The film takes its time, and builds up a genuinely convincing impression of the difficulties of an immigrant family, and the hysteria directed against foreigners during World War One. (Howard's parents were themselves Irish immigrants). Some contrived plot motivations apart, the film is honest, restrained, and free of false sentiment. A minor element of melodrama, involving the Bolshoysk or the period, allows Howard's still only relatively developed flair for melodrama to come to life, and some scenes of menace in shadowy basements are worth the price of admission. The borrowing from Lang is probably quite deliberate, since Howard's later work was marked by Germanic. (Among the other Lang-Mabuse traits here displayed is the tendency to stress the inter-relationship of decadence with a lusting for modern art: the Red villains are seen grouped under modernist paintings!) Other scenes have both emotional power and a kind of visual beauty; the touching scene of the mother's farewell, as he leaves for war, played largely off camera, bears comparison with the famous homecoming scene with the "Red, White and Blue". In a period when the camera was given to maximum mobility, it moves here only when there is a reason for it to do so. Too, the film provides interesting glimpses of the montage and fast cutting that were later, in more polished form, to become such a trademark of Howard's. There is more interest in the way and tone of cutting between close-ups - a device of which Howard seemed very fond. He had used it in "White Gold", and he used it right up to the end of his career, in films like Korda's "Hound of the Baskervilles" (1942). Another offbeat adjunct are the subtitles of John Krafft, written, but not condescendingly, in the idiom of the immigrant hero.
"A Ship Comes In" is not exactly a dynamic film; possibly its greatest appeal will be to those students of film history who know Howard's later work, and can recognize this as both a milestone and a turning point. But its innate sincerity and taste should make it an eminently satisfying film for almost any audience.

Piano Score for this film arranged and played by

STUART ODERMAN

TEN MINUTE INTERMISSION

WATERFRONT (Rank-General Film Distributors, 1950) Directed by Michael Anderson Produced by Paul Soakin; Screenplay by John Brophy and Paul Soakin from the novel by John Brophy; Camera, Harry Waxman; Dialogue Director, Peter Cotes; Art Director, Vetchinsky; Musical Direction, Muir Mathieson; 80 minutes

With Robert Newton (Peter McCabe); Kathleen Harrison (Mrs McCabe); Susan Shaw (Connie McCabe); Richard Burton (Ben Satterthwaita); Avis Scott (Nora McCabe); Kenneth Griffith (Maurice Bruno); Robin Netscher (George Alexander); Olive Sloane (Mrs Gibson); Charles Victor (Bill); James Hayter (Captain); Michael Brennan (Engineer); Allan Jeayes (Prison officer); Hattie Jacques (Singer).

"Waterfront" was released here late, after Brando's "On the Waterfront", and its title was changed to "Waterfront Women" partly to avoid confusion with the Brando film, but mainly to provide a much more exploitable title to the independent distributor that picked it up. It opened at the Rialto in Times Square with a very lurid lobby display, attracted little attention, and was quickly forgotten.

Which is a pity, for it is one of the best British films of its period.

The Rank empire was in a bad way in 1950, and the newly re-organised and much invigorated London Films (Korda) combine was taking over as the leading producer of prestige British films. Rank had already lost Powell & Pressburger, Launder and Gilliat and Carol Reed to Korda, and was about to lose David Lean to him. Moreover, his biggest stars - David Mason and Stewart Granger - had gone to Hollywood, and his biggest new star, Jean Simmons, was likewise about to branch out on her own. Rank would shortly embark on an ill-advised attempt to conquer the Hollywood market with a series of big, Hollywood-styled action films, but in the meantime was marking time and retrenching with fairly unambitious little films, sometimes with interesting new directors. "Waterfront" is from this period, and was also the first film to be directed by Michael Anderson (although he had earlier co-directed "Private Angelo" with Peter Ustinov -- not that anyone really co-directed when Ustinov was in charge). As with many first films, it was to remain his best - and his potential as a major new director was never to be fully realised, although he was successful in a purely commercial sense.

Almost a film noir, "Waterfront", laid in the British depression of the 30's, is a curiously downbeat film to come at a time when Britain was shaking off its postwar disillusionment and entering into a period of greater optimism. However, despite its background of poverty and frustration, it is not a grimly depressing film like the earlier "Love on the Dole", but is richly human, warm, and sometimes quite funny.

Notwithstanding the literate writing and good direction, it is the acting that makes the film work so well. Richard Burton (his third film, and best role to date) and Robert Newton are such interesting representatives of totally different schools of acting that it is a pity that they share no scenes together. Each is excellent in his own way, and even though Newton still employs a good deal of body-language (and remarkable facial grimacing) his performance is, for him, both restrained and controlled. It's a joy to watch him in the final prison cell scene with his son, using all his eyeball rolling and tongue-biting tricks, and yet still managing to underplay so that the scene has tremendous poignancy. This scene in itself reminds us what a great actor Newton could be - and what a tragic waste it was when his over-fondness for liquor (a mild way of putting it) made him both unreliable as an actor and, of course, shortened his life. And it's a pleasure too to see Kathleen Harrison, usually typed as a coquettish comedienne, giving such a moving and well-etched performance as the wife, neatly avoiding all the pitfalls and cliches so prevalent in the rather class-conscious writing of her role.

The use of a musical score based on classical music (in this case Liszt) is probably an echo from the scoring of Lean's "Brief Encounter" - though it's less like an echo from that scene - and it doesn't always work, though it does give the film a kind of nobility too, as though it were a kind of working-class "Cavalcade". On the whole though, and despite some casting and narrative ingredients that have become cliches since but weren't then, it's a fine little work, sensitive and honest, and in some ways not unrelated to its co-feature.

William K. Everson

Program ends approx. 10.40